

The Rinko Mystery

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Echizen Rinko isn't around very often, but Ryoma thought that it had been an unusually long time since he'd last seen his mother.

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Disclaimer: Prince of Tennis does not belong to me. This story was written purely for enjoyment (and even failed at that!).

Warnings: Character death, violence.

Author's Note: This was borne from an online discussion about Rinko's conspicuous absence in canon. You see her from behind once or twice, and get the impression that she's there off-camera, and there was that flashback 'how they met' episode, but THAT'S IT. For 175+ episodes and however many volumes the manga is, that struck me as almost creepy. So... this fic was borne.

For the record, I hate this genre with a passion. That probably comes through with this piece. Needless to say, I probably won't be dabbling in this genre again. Also, it appears that I have a subconscious hatred of Nanjiroh that cannot be explained. I have given up trying to rectify this and have instead decided to embrace it. Consider yourselves warned.

The Rinko Mystery

By Sinnatious

It was a standard morning in the Echizen household. Ryoma continually hit the snooze button on his alarm, until Karupin jumped up onto his bed and started pawing at his face. With a groan, he rolled over, glanced at the clock, and dragged himself from bed.

Ten minutes later, the Seigaku freshman was - rather sloppily - dressed and ambling down the stairs. He shuffled into the kitchen where his father and cousin were already eating breakfast.

"Where's 'kaa-san?" he asked, mid-yawn.

"Left for work early," his father replied.

"Aunt Rinko sure works hard," Nanako commented. "Weekends now, too!"

Nanjiroh grunted in acknowledgement as he opened the paper.
"Good thing we've got darling Nanako-chan to help out!" he sang.

Ryoma sleepily flopped onto his seat at the table. It was a Japanese breakfast. He started eating with a slurred 'thanks for the meal'.

Already finished, Nanako stood and started busying herself about the kitchen. "Oh, Auntie left her magazine here," she noted, picking it up.

"Hah! And she complains about MY magazines! At least I don't leave mine lying around!"

"Hers are *business* magazines," Ryoma pointed out, starting to wake up.

Nanako diplomatically just suggested, "I'll go put it on the coffee table with the others, shall I?" She folded down the corner of the page the magazine was open on and added it to the pile of older issues in the living room. Ryoma barely resisted the urge to roll his eyes. His cousin was so thoughtful sometimes he was convinced she was a saint.

Karupin pattered into the kitchen. His father saw, picking up his favourite toy off the ground with his toes and waving it in the air.
"Hora, hora!"

The Himalayan cat hissed, and suddenly latched on to the toe with his teeth. "Owowowowow! Stupid cat!" Nanjiroh dropped his newspaper and shook his foot. Karupin darted away with toy in mouth.

Ryoma smirked. "That's what you get for being stupid," he remarked, leaning down to pet his cat as he twined himself around his legs with a mew. Glancing at the clock, he swallowed down the last of his breakfast. "I'm leaving."

Nanako reminded him to drink his two glasses of milk, made him button his shirt properly, and saw him off on his way to school. Halfway there, Momoshiro rode up on his bike and Ryoma hopped on to the back. They arrived to morning practice just in time to avoid running laps.

It was a typical morning, just like any other.

Ryoma slumped down on his seat at the table and glared at the western-style breakfast on the plate. "'Kaaaaa-san!" he called. There was no response. A moment later Nanjiroh ambled into the kitchen, yawning and scratching his stomach.

"Too loud for so early in the morning." The old man flopped into his own chair and opened the newspaper.

"Where's 'kaa-san?" Ryoma asked irritably.

"How should I know?" his father retorted grumpily. "I just woke up myself. Ask your cousin."

As if summoned, Nanako appeared in the doorway. "Oh, sorry Ryoma. It looks like Auntie left for work early again. She left a note on the fridge, though!" She handed over the piece of paper to Nanjiroh, who glanced at it and snorted.

"Writing in English again. How much more practice do we need?" He carelessly threw the piece of paper to his son. Ryoma glanced at the messy English letters and frowned. He wasn't quite awake yet, but he pushed the fog away from his brain long enough to decipher the note.

"That's weird."

"What's weird?"

"She spelt 'breakfast' wrong."

That got the old man's attention. "What? No way."

"See? 'Brakefast'."

Nanjiroh squinted at the slip of paper at length. "Ha! And after all that harping on about practicing English she gives us! We can lord it up next time, boy!" He grinned widely at that.

"Uncle!" Nanako scolded. "Auntie is probably just tired. You shouldn't rub in a small mistake like that. She was probably in a rush."

"Whatever you say, Nanako-chaaaaan!" Nanjiroh sang, returning his attention to the paper.

"I still worry about Aunt Rinko, though," Nanako continued, joining them at the table. "It's not healthy to work so much. Do you think maybe she'd like it if I made her a bento and brought it to her at work?"

"That's a pretty big commute," Nanjiroh commented.

"I'm not that busy. I'm sure I could find the time. Maybe not today, but later in the week. Or even on the weekend, so Ryoma can come?" she asked hopefully.

Ryoma grunted noncommittally. He didn't particular want to spend his precious free time riding the train for an hour and a half just to visit his mother's boring workplace for five minutes.

After a few minutes, his father commented. "She probably wouldn't have a business lunch on the weekend. We could do it then."

Nanako smiled brightly. "Oh, Uncle will come too? I think it will be wonderful. I'm sure Auntie will really appreciate the gesture."

Ryoma frowned at his father. Since when was the old man so thoughtful? "Did she threaten your magazines again?"

"Cheeky brat."

Ryoma shrugged, chugging down his second glass of milk and standing. "I'm leaving."

"Have a good day at school!" Nanako called after him cheerily.

He missed Momoshiro on the way to school that morning and was ten minutes late for morning practice. Tezuka made him run a lap for each minute.

Ryoma sleepily chewed on his Japanese-style breakfast while his cousin and father chatted in the background.

"Thank you so much for the tickets, Uncle," she said sheepishly. "Listening to Aunt Rinko talk about America so much..."

"It's least I can do for my delightful Nanako-chan!" his father exclaimed, though his enthusiasm was blatantly overdramatic. "Who is so cute and helps out around the house so much while my lovely wife is so busy!" The starry eyes turned into a dull deadpan as he turned to his son. "Unlike some uncute kids I could mention."

"Not my fault I was born male," Ryoma replied in an equally flat tone.

Ignoring the exchange, Nanako continued cheerily, "Are you sure, though? I mean, I know it's expensive..."

Nanjiroh waved it off. "My friend had to reschedule, and couldn't cancel the tickets. Sorry it's such short notice."

"No, no, the fact that I get to go at all... Are you sure you'll be able to manage while I'm gone, though? Aunt Rinko is already so overworked..."

"I can help out too, you know!" Nanjiroh squawked indignantly. "I'm a grown man!"

Ryoma muttered something uncomplimentary under his breath. His father glared at him, and whacked him on the head with his rolled-up newspaper.

"Let's see... I get back on the 25th," Nanako recalled, tapping a finger to her lips. "That's quite a while. Are you *sure*- "

"Of course I'm sure, Nanako-chan!" His father insisted. "Though it pains my heart that I won't be seeing your lovely face for so loooong!"

Nanako giggled. "Stop being so silly, Uncle."

"Perverted is more like it," Ryoma muttered. He managed to dodge the newspaper this time, standing and heading towards the door. "I'm leaving."

"Don't forget your racquet bag!" Nanako called after him.

As if. That would be like forgetting one of his arms.

Ryoma slept in on Sunday - for once there was no tennis practice. He finally wandered downstairs around lunchtime. The television was blaring in the living room, but the house was otherwise silent.

That left him off-kilter briefly, until he remembered that Nanako had left for her trip while he was at school the day before. "What's for lunch?" Ryoma called out.

"Your mother made breakfast for you before she left this morning. You can eat that for lunch," his father said, not taking his eyes from the television.

Ryoma headed to the fridge, peered inside and eventually located a plate covered in cling-wrap. He threw it in the microwave to reheat it, and then sat down at the table to eat. He wrinkled his nose after the first few bites, suddenly missing Nanako. Maybe his mother wasn't as good a cook as he remembered.

He ate leisurely, and then took delight in only drinking only one of the two prescribed glasses of milk. Once that was done, he wandered into the living room to see what was so fascinating on television. Maybe there were some tennis matches on.

"You're watching... what *are* you watching?" It definitely wasn't tennis.

"Some lawyer show," his father replied with a yawn.

"Why are you watching *that* ?" His father watched a lot of rubbish on television, but it was usually either sports or something with an attractive woman in it. This show didn't seem to feature either.

"Can't find my magazine," he grunted, eyes transfixed on the screen in front of him.

Figures. "Shouldn't you be minding the shrine?"

"It'll be okay for a while."

Karupin wandered into the room, paws making an almost inaudible patter on the tatami mats. His father reached out absentmindedly to rub his head as he passed, but the Himalayan cat hissed and swiped at his hand.

" Ow ! Crazy cat! What was that for?!"

Ryoma crouched down and Karupin ran over into his arms. His father glared at the cat, still cradling his bleeding hand. "You were *there* ." His voice was accusing.

Ryoma rolled his eyes. "Don't blame Karupin for your misplaced magazine." He stroked the top of the cat's head soothingly, but Karupin kept a steely eye on his father all the same.

Nanjiroh huffed, and turned back to the television, grumbling under his breath.

Ryoma spent the afternoon hanging around the street courts and arcades with Momoshiro. When he got home, he played a rather lazy game of tennis with his father, and then they ordered take-out for dinner. As far as Sundays went, it was okay. It was only when he getting into bed that night that Ryoma remembered Nanako had been planning to bring his mother lunch at work that day; at least, until her impromptu trip to America. The guilt only lasted for the few minutes it took him to fall asleep.

It wasn't a very good day. That morning Ryoma had forgotten his racquet bag - he'd been seeing himself off in the mornings, and without Nanako there mothering over him, he usually missed something. He wasn't exactly at his best right after he'd woken up, but he'd been miffed about forgetting the racquet bag of all things, especially since the time spent going back to fetch it made him so late for morning practice that the captain ordered him to spend the remainder just running laps, thus defeating the whole point of going back to fetch it in the first place. Then Inui had broken out the juice during drills in afternoon practice, and managed to make the requirements for avoiding the supposedly 'healthy' drink so impossible that everyone except Tezuka was going home with stomachaches.

Given the currently tumultuous nature of his digestive system, Ryoma was hoping that for a change they might actually be able to have a home-cooked meal instead of take-out. Nanako wasn't going

to be back for another two weeks, and he didn't think he could last that long on takeaway food. Surely whatever case his mother was working on should be finished soon?

"I'm home!" he called out automatically, but didn't receive a response. He hadn't expected one - the old man was supposed to be minding the shrine during the day after all.

He paused. Something was different. After a moment, he realised that the shoes in the foyer had changed. For a second, Ryoma was heartened by the thought that his mother might actually be home, but his eyes immediately slid to the empty spot next to them. Oh, she'd just switched shoes. He wasn't sure if he was reassured by the evidence of her fleeting presence, or depressed that he'd missed it.

The afternoon was spent completing his homework and playing with Karupin. When Ryoma came downstairs near dinnertime, Nanjiroh was lounging in the living room with a pile of magazines. He was apparently enjoying the freedom of being able to read whatever he wanted in full view without either his wife or niece nagging him about it.

"Kaa-san was here today?" Ryoma asked without preamble.

"Yeah, she came home to change clothes while you were still at school," his father replied disinterestedly.

"Oh." No hope of a home-cooked dinner after all then. Though with the way breakfast had tasted lately, maybe that wasn't such a loss. Takeout was probably better than food made in a rush. "Where are we ordering from today then?"

Nanjiroh waved him towards the refrigerator. "Just choose one of the menus on the fridge."

At least takeout meant that there weren't any dishes to clean. The kitchen was always tidied in the mornings, but Ryoma felt a tiny bit guilty about leaving dirty dishes out when his mother was already

had so much work to do. His father seemed to think it was okay, though, so he didn't spare it any more thought.

Morning practice had ended, and everyone was getting changed in the clubroom. "Hey, Echizen..." Momoshiro stopped in the middle of buttoning up his uniform and peered at him. "Something's different."

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"Is it the hair... no... maybe..." His friend scratched his head. "I can't put my finger on it."

"Echizen's uniform appears to be un-ironed," Inui interjected, saving Momoshiro the agony of figuring it out himself. "An anomaly."

Ryoma blanched. "You have to iron these things too?"

"Of course," Fuji answered. "Have you been doing your laundry yourself?"

"Ochibi is so mature, nya!" Eiji hollered from the other side of the clubroom.

"Doesn't your mother do that stuff for you?" Momoshiro asked as he finished putting on his uniform.

Ryoma frowned. "She's been working lots of overtime." It was probably already a stretch for his mother to keep preparing breakfast for them in the mornings before she left - it was a bit much to hope she could manage the laundry as well. Nanako normally took care of it, but with his cousin out of the picture and quickly running out of clean clothes, Ryoma had been forced to give himself a crash course in clothes washing. Typically, his father was of absolutely no use. But then it wasn't like the old man to ever do anything that would actually get his clothes dirty.

"Echizen Rinko, maiden name Takeuchi," Inui recited. "Met and married Echizen Nanjiroh in the United States fifteen years ago. Is currently employed as an attorney."

"How do you *know* all this stuff Inui-senpai?" Momoshiro exclaimed; looking just a little freaked out.

"You take care of the housework at home?" Oishi asked kindly. "I didn't know."

"Just recently," he mumbled. "My cousin's away on holidays, and my mother's been busy for the past few..." Ryoma trailed off. Thinking about it critically, when was the last time he'd seen his mother? Sure, he sometimes went a couple of days without seeing her at all, but now that he thought about it... he was having trouble remembering exactly when the last time he'd laid eyes on her face was.

There was plenty of evidence of her arriving home late and leaving in the morning, though. Different shoes in the foyer. Breakfast covered in cling wrap. The occasional note on the fridge in curly English handwriting. One of her business magazines left open on the couch. A tidy kitchen.

Before Nanako had left on her holiday, he hadn't really noticed. But without his cousin's presence filling the house, his mother's absence felt a little more pronounced. And the longer he thought about it, the more disturbed he became.

He'd been annoyed before that his mother was too busy to even stay for breakfast or be at home on weekends. Now, though... it was a little unusual. The last time he could remember seeing his mother for sure was the day before his English test - she'd scolded him for not studying or taking the subject seriously, and insisted on speaking in English all through breakfast.

That had been a couple of weeks ago now.

That just wasn't natural, was it?

He turned it over in his head again and again. Was work really that busy? Or did she just not want to see her family? He knew that she often got cross with the old man when he did nothing other than laze about the house reading porn magazines, but Ryoma didn't see why he should be punished for it.

"Don't overwork yourself, okay?" Oishi looked worried. "It's a lot of responsibility for someone your age." Ryoma was still too absorbed in his contemplation to protest the implication that he was still a kid. The vice-captain started straightening his collar. "Here, if it sits like this..."

Ryoma wasn't quite so out of it to not protest *that* . "It's fine, Oishi-senpai. Thanks anyway."

Tezuka entered the clubroom just then, saving him from further embarrassment. "What are you all still doing in here? Class starts in ten minutes! Get moving!"

Ryoma contemplated the strange situation with his mother for most of the day, and by that afternoon reached a conclusion - he'd just wait up and ask her himself.

Unfortunately, he only lasted until eleven o'clock before he dozed off. He woke up sometime in the early hours of the morning with a sore neck and crawled into bed, a little bit annoyed at missing his chance. He hadn't expected his mother to come home *that* late.

Put out by his failure, Ryoma came prepared the next night. He was determined. Armed with four cans of sugary, caffeinated Ponta to help keep him awake, Ryoma settled by his window after changing into his pyjamas and turning off the light, eyes firmly fixated on the front path. He had a clear view - there was no way he'd miss his mother's arrival home. She'd be cross when she found him waiting up far past his bed time when he had school the next day, but he'd just make up for the lost sleep in English class or something. He

needed to remember what she looked like. It was silly, but he had this irrational fear that if he didn't see her, he might forget.

Lights in the street, barely visible through the trees in the front yard, started to wink out one by one. The air began to cool, and Ryoma idly wondered if perhaps he should drag a blanket to the window before deciding that such comfort might compromise his plan to stay awake. He then bargained with the idea of grabbing the blanket and setting up camp in the foyer, so that when his mother came home he'd be woken up automatically, but the chances of his father finding him and sending him off to bed were too high. The old man would probably make fun of him for missing his mother, and he'd never hear the end of it. Better he just keep vigil.

It occurred to him sometime around midnight that it might have been smarter to ask his father about her persistent absence instead of staying up to see for himself. It was too late, though - the old man was probably already in bed, and he'd stayed up this far. Might as well see it through. Ryoma shifted uncomfortably, feeling stiff and tired. He gave up and wrapped himself in a blanket, but cracked open a Ponta. The hiss of air escaping as he broke the seal seemed unnaturally loud.

Around two in the morning, his eyelids were drooping and a cold heaviness started to settle into his bones. The house was almost oppressively silent. Even Karupin was asleep, curled up comfortably next to him on the bed. He was sort of tempted to give up. The trains had already stopped running. Where was his mother? She wouldn't get any sleep at all, arriving home so late. Ryoma cracked open another Ponta to chase away the fatigue. The normally sweet beverage tasted dull on his tongue. He probably should have brought some snacks to even it out.

The night wore on. If it weren't for the regular hits of caffeine, Ryoma doubted he would have been able to keep his eyes open. It didn't help that just watching the front path like that was really boring. Every now and again a car would rumble past, the headlights distorting the shadows and painting the garden white, but it was

otherwise completely still and silent. There wasn't even a breeze - Ryoma might as well have been staring at a photograph. He acknowledged that he really should have given up when the trains stopped running, but stubbornness had set in now. He jerked his drooping head up and glared out the window. His eyes felt dry, but he resisted the urge to close them.

The sun was starting to peek above the horizon at five a.m. Ryoma heard a series of uncoordinated thumps from his father's room, then the scuff of bare feet walking down the stairs. What was the stupid old man doing up so early?

He kept his eyes focused on the front path, ignoring the barely audible sounds of his father clattering around downstairs. It was mostly just automatic, now. His mind had turned blank after the caffeine hit from the last Ponta wore off. It felt like his mouth was full of sand. He was actually looking forward to brushing his teeth.

At 6am, Karupin got up and stretched, then twined himself around his ankles. Ryoma petted him absent-mindedly. Half an hour later, his alarm started to beep. It jerked him from his hazy trance.

It was time to get ready for school.

Robotically, Ryoma got dressed, yawning hugely as he did so. At the regular time he shuffled sleepily down the stairs. His father was, as usual, sitting at the kitchen table with the newspaper open.

"Breakfast is in the fridge," he grunted.

Ryoma headed to the fridge. Sure enough, there was a cling-wrap covered plate sitting inside.

He sent his father an odd look. The old man glanced over. "What?"

"... Nothing." He withdrew the meal from the fridge, slouched down at the table and started eating. He wasn't sure if it was just his

exhaustion or all the Ponta messing with his tastebuds, but it tasted like soggy cardboard. Breakfast was finished in silence.

"I'm leaving."

"See you this afternoon," his father replied distractedly, still reading the paper.

Ryoma checked that he had everything and then went to the foyer to put on his shoes. He paused. The shoes had changed again. The blue pair of low heels was there instead of the black pair.

That sight seemed to chase away the last of the exhaustion-induced foggiess hovering over him. He'd stayed awake all night - he hadn't dozed off for even an instant, however tempting it had been. Yet that morning the shoes had changed and there was a plate of breakfast in the fridge covered in cling wrap.

Only his mother hadn't ever come home to change shoes or make breakfast.

Which meant...

Ryoma swallowed harshly.

What exactly *did* it mean?

Ryoma shuffled through the day like a zombie. His classmates couldn't even rouse him at the end of English class, so he wound up sleeping through Maths as well. Another two cans of Ponta at lunch gave him the energy to stay awake at least, though he wasn't looking forward to afternoon practice.

Momoshiro stared at him when he entered the clubroom. "Whoa, Echizen, you look even more tired now than you did this morning."

"Echizen is certainly not a morning person," Inui agreed, "But I'm surprised to find him looking like this in the afternoon."

Oishi was immediately set to worrying. "You're not coming down with something, are you?"

Rubbing at his eyes, he waved his senpai off. "I just didn't sleep very much last night." Thinking about *why* was enough to chase away the exhaustion. Ryoma frowned. It had been bugging him all day, but the thoughts refused to settle in his head.

Maybe his mother had finally left his father. He found it hard to believe she'd do so without at least saying goodbye to him, but it wasn't so hard to imagine her getting fed up with Nanjiroh's laziness and just leaving in a temper with a suitcase of clothes. She'd been getting on her husband's case a lot more recently - maybe her patience had snapped, and the old man didn't want to admit it so was constructing elaborate stories about why his mother wasn't coming home. His father might even be trying to protect him from the truth.

It was definitely possible. The only issue he could see with that scenario was Nanako. Surely Nanako would have known about something like that?

Maybe... maybe she was in on it. Maybe she didn't want him to feel bad, so she was going along with it. Maybe that was even why she'd gone to America. Maybe his mother had fled to America, and instead of a holiday, maybe Nanako was going to try and convince his mother to come back!

He desperately wanted to believe that. Because the alternative...

Ryoma shook his head quickly as though to chase the thoughts away. That was absurd. He'd been watching too many movies. It was probably the lack of sleep getting to him.

"Echizen? Helloooooo, Echizen?" Momoshiro called, waving a hand in front of his face.

Blinking, Ryoma turned to his senpai. "What?"

"You really *are* out of it. Maybe you should skip practice. Oooiii, Tezuka-buchou!"

"What is it?" The captain turned towards them.

"Is it okay if Echizen doesn't come to practice today? He's sort of-"

"What are you doing?" Ryoma hissed. "I'm fine. Leave it."

Tezuka came over. "What's the matter?"

"He's been all hazy all day," Momoshiro reported. "He didn't sleep much last night. I just thought that he might be better off going home and getting rest."

"I'm fine," Ryoma insisted even as he struggled to push back a yawn. "I got some sleep in class." He wasn't altogether comfortable with the idea of heading home straight away. Going home meant that he'd have to think about issues he'd much rather ignore in favour of tennis.

Tezuka gave him a dubious glance. "If you say so." He turned to the rest of the clubhouse. "Team meeting on the court in five minutes!"

Practice was a complete disaster. The only good thing was that Inui's Super Deluxe Energy Re-vitalizing Juice woke him up better than ten cans of Ponta could.

The doorbell rang, and Ryoma headed to answer it with Karupin hot on his heels. He took the packed bowls of ramen from the delivery boy and handed over some money. Karupin mewed, getting underfoot as he took the food to the table.

"Food's here?" Nanjiroh asked, coming into the kitchen. "About time!" He reached out to take his order from Ryoma. "Hey-Owowowow OW !" He nearly dropped the bowl, hopping away on one foot. Karupin leapt backwards, hissing. "Damn cat!"

"Karupin," Ryoma scolded, crouching down and grabbing his cat. "This food isn't for you."

His father was glaring at the cat. Feeling a little nervous now, Ryoma drew Karupin closer, stroking his soft white fur softly. After a moment his father turned away, grabbing two pairs of chopsticks. "Che. C'mon, brat, let's eat."

Ryoma quietly took a seat across from his father. He suddenly didn't have much appetite, but cracked open the lid on his ramen anyway, and bit back the complaint on his tongue. Of course they couldn't have home-cooked meals if his mother wasn't coming home. He'd just have to endure until Nanako got back.

"How was school?" his father asked gruffly, in a tone of voice that suggested that he didn't much care either way but was obligated to ask as the only adult around.

"Fine," Ryoma replied tonelessly.

"That club of yours is going okay?"

"Yeah." What more could he really say?

Silence.

He stared at his father as he ate. He wasn't acting any different than usual. His behaviour was perfectly ordinary, perfectly unworried. He didn't think the old man was that good of an actor, but then, he guessed his father had never been really motivated before.

There were a million questions burning in his throat, but all of them died on the tip of his tongue.

It would be so simple to ask, to find out for sure... but Ryoma was afraid of the answer.

Because if it wasn't that his mother had stormed out, if that wasn't why she had disappeared...

His fingers tightened around the chopsticks. Nanjiroh glanced up from his food, chewing on a mouthful of noodles. "What?"

"Nothing," he replied in a small voice.

If he asked, and he was wrong... what would his father do?

The week passed painfully slowly. Ryoma continued to fervently believe that his mother would be coming back any day, but it was impossible not to be unnerved by the changing shoes in the foyer or cling-wrapped meals in the fridge or half-read business magazines on the couch when he knew it was his father responsible for it. It just didn't sit right with him.

Nanjiroh was *lazy*. That was the first thing anyone who knew him would say about the man, even before 'he's good at tennis'. It seemed like an awful lot of effort to go to in order to save face or spare his son the turmoil of discovering his mother had run off.

Maybe if his father had shown some visible signs of unusual behaviour, stress, *anything*, he'd have a better clue of how to read the situation. If his mother had left, it would be natural for the man to be cranky or moody, but his father acted exactly the same as he always did. He'd laze about the shrine all day reading his magazines, then laze around the house at night watching television.

In fact, the only change in his father's behaviour was that he didn't ask him to play tennis anymore. They didn't necessarily play *every* day, but Ryoma estimated that they'd probably only played a handful of times since his mother had disappeared, which was a rather sharp drop off in frequency. And they were never proper games, either - his

father never wanted to move around much, so wouldn't go from side to side to serve or change courts. Ryoma thought it an absolute mockery of the game, but the old man was still light years ahead of him so he couldn't really say anything. He'd just thought it was his father being stupid again, but the correlation of the change in their games and his mother's disappearance was starting to bug him.

That other horrible possibility was like a growing itch at the back of skull that he couldn't quite ignore, even though he really wanted to.

Ryoma was starting to become less trusting of coincidences.

It was all too complicated. He really wasn't sure what to do. He couldn't just outright accuse his father, or even tell someone else. He'd look stupid and paranoid if he were wrong. But he couldn't just do nothing, either.

If it were more like tennis, he wouldn't be having this problem. Tennis was simple. Ryoma understood tennis. But this...

He didn't know anything for sure, but even the suspicion... the notion...

It wasn't possible, was it?

His father couldn't possibly be a murderer.

But what if he *was* ?

The knowledge that he maybe, possibly, was sharing the house with a murderer did not give Ryoma any peace of mind. It haunted his every waking moment. Every night he'd jerk awake to the slightest noise, tormented by nightmares of blood and screams and shadows.

He didn't know what to do. As much as Ryoma wanted to believe Nanako was off in America trying to convince his mother to come home, the possibility grew in his mind until he was unable to ignore

it. It made just as much sense for his father to have given Nanako the tickets to get her out the country so that she stopped asking uncomfortable questions about why her Aunt was working so much. And it made a lot more sense for his father to go to that sort of effort to cover up a crime rather than spare feelings.

It made a lot of sense, but he didn't want to believe it.

Ryoma hadn't ever really been *afraid* before. Not even when Sasabe or Akutsu or any of the other bullies at the tennis courts threatened him. He knew that they could never really do anything serious, and he knew that he could beat them at tennis. He'd never really had any phobias, either. Inui's juice was scary, sure, but it didn't provoke the same cold, chilling sensation that ran right from his fingers to the tips of his toes as this thought did. It paralysed him. It made it difficult to talk, difficult to sleep, difficult to *breathe* .

The sensation was a foreign one, and Ryoma had no idea how to handle it.

He'd perfected his poker face at school. Ryoma was never a terribly expressive person to begin with, so nobody noticed the blank mask he wore to hide the endless dread and fear curling in his stomach. Oishi worried a little over the growing bags under his eyes, and Inui commented on his skittish behaviour, and Tezuka looked concerned when he nearly jumped out of his skin when the captain yelled at him to pay attention, but Ryoma didn't say anything in response to their concerns. What *could* he say? 'Oh, I think my father might have killed my mother, but I'm too scared to ask'? They'd think he was crazy. He didn't have any proof. As it was, he was half convinced it was his own imagination running away with him.

Lack of proof didn't stop his heart thudding in his chest every time he found a messy note written in English from his mother though, or from flinching when he saw that the shoes in the foyer had changed again, or from tensing up when his father so casually spouted yet another lie about his mother coming home to change clothes or leaving early.

He could last, though. It was only another ten days until Nanako came back, and then he could ask her and lay his suspicions to rest. There was probably some boring explanation for it that would make him feel like an idiot for worrying so much.

"I'm home," he whispered. The house was silent. His father was usually minding the shrine at that time of day.

Ryoma forced himself to relax as he moved about the house. It was okay. Even *if* his father were a murderer, he reasoned, so long as he continued to feign ignorance, he'd be safe, right? He'd been fine so far.

Right. Definitely. Ryoma forced himself to push his concerns to the back of his mind, and focused on doing laundry and completing homework.

Halfway through his science homework, however, Ryoma realised that something felt off. The house was too quiet.

The house had been too quiet for a long time, but never quite *this* quiet.

Abandoning his homework, he headed to the door of the room - left propped open so that his cat could come and go as he pleased.

"... Karupin?" he called out tentatively. It was a little weird that the Himalayan cat hadn't come to bother him yet. Most days if he didn't greet him at the door, he'd be rubbing at his legs within an hour, demanding attention. That was probably why the house seemed so lifeless. He hadn't stowed away in his bag and got lost at his school again, had he?!

Homework forgotten, Ryoma scoured the house, checking all of Karupin's favourite hiding places. He even went to the kitchen and shook the box of dried cat food - a sound that was certain to bring his pet running.

Eventually, after looking all over the house and even checking the yard, Ryoma was forced to return to his homework. He didn't actually remember *doing* any of it, since he was too busy worrying about his cat's sudden unexplained absence, but an hour or so later he was finished and left staring blankly out the window.

Around dinnertime, he descended the stairs. His father had obviously returned at some point, and was lying on the ground in the living room, head propped up with one elbow, watching television. He turned slightly when Ryoma entered the room. "I already ate. You can order yourself something if you like."

Food wasn't really at the top of his agenda. "Where's Karupin?" he asked.

Nanjiroh scoffed, flicking through the channels on the television. "How should I know where that damn cat is? I haven't seen it all day."

Ryoma's tongue felt thick in his mouth as he swallowed his response. He shuffled back upstairs.

Karupin's absence didn't feel so mysterious all of a sudden.

When the time came for bed, Ryoma locked the door to his room and flicked the light off. He picked up one of his tennis racquets, crawled into the corner and pulled his knees up against his chest. His fingers clenched the handle of his racquet so hard that his knuckles turned white, and he waited for dawn to arrive.

All he had to do was last until Nanako came back, and everything would be okay.

Ryoma scuffed his feet along the sidewalk outside of school. Afternoon practice had finished a while before, but he'd dallied on the grounds for as long as he could, reluctant to go home. He didn't

want to spend any more time alone in that house with his father than necessary. Just in case.

It wasn't home if you didn't feel safe there anymore.

Even knowing that the old man was up the shrine for most of the afternoon didn't help. Just being there made him think of Karupin. His cat wouldn't run to greet him at the door, or rub against his legs demanding attention, or curl up next to him on his bed at night. He clenched his teeth, determined not to cry, and reminded himself stoically that he didn't have any proof of what happened to Karupin either.

Two mysterious disappearances were a little hard to ignore, though.

In his roundabout wanderings, Ryoma spied a familiar figure. The captain was sitting at a bus stop, looking deeply immersed in a book. For lack of anything else to do, Ryoma headed over. "Buchou."

Tezuka glanced up, glasses briefly catching the afternoon sun and nearly blinding him. "Echizen."

The captain didn't seem inclined to say anything other than that, so it was up to Ryoma to drive the conversation along. "You're waiting for the bus?"

Tezuka nodded. "I appear to have just missed the previous one."

It meant the captain would be waiting a while. That suited Ryoma perfectly. "What are you reading?"

Tezuka just held up the book so he could see. Ryoma squinted at it, but the title wasn't familiar. The book was impressively thick, though. "What's it about?"

"It's a detective novel. Murder mystery, specifically."

Ryoma briefly felt ill at the thought. Murder mystery. He felt like he was stuck in one of those at the moment. "Heh. Buchou likes that

sort of thing?"

The senior placed a bookmark on the page he was on, seeing that his kouhai was intending on sticking around. "It's my preferred genre of reading, yes."

"Buchou reads detective novels..." Ryoma mused. "So, do they help?"

"Help?"

"Do they give you detective skills?" he elaborated.

Tezuka adjusted his glasses. "I suppose it might improve your critical thinking after a while, but I'm not sure if works of fiction are a good way to learn about a profession. There are some common elements, though. In this one they're currently trying to track down the body. This particular author has a habit of arranging his clues in such a way that the reader can usually figure out where the body is before the characters."

"The body..." Ryoma repeated. The words echoed in his head. "A body. Yeah, if it were that... there should be a body, right?"

"Echizen?" Tezuka asked, confused.

"But where would he keep it?" he muttered to himself. If there was a body, the old man had to have kept it nearby - if he'd dumped it in the river or something, someone would have come across it by now. Thinking about it, there were all sorts of places for his father to hide a body on their property. They had a pretty large house and garden, and then there was the shrine out the back as well.

"Echizen?" Tezuka repeated, sounding somewhere between startled and worried now.

He wanted to wait until Nanako came home before jumping to conclusions or asking uncomfortable questions, but surely a look

around wouldn't hurt? After all, if he found a body, he'd know for sure, right?

Ryoma didn't really want to find a body. The thought was too scary to entertain. But he couldn't handle just sitting around waiting for Nanako to come back from her holiday, either. Maybe...

He eyed the captain contemplatively. "Buchou, have you ever tried being a detective for real?"

Ryoma unlocked the door to the house and entered, kicking off his shoes. "I'm home," he called out in a loud voice. There was no response. His father was up at the shrine, then. That was good - Ryoma had been counting on that. He turned to his guest. "Come on in, Buchou."

He headed further into the house while Tezuka took off his shoes. His heart clenched when Karupin didn't come to greet him, but he resolutely pushed the thought from his mind. He had a mission now.

"We'll start upstairs first, and work our way down," he decided. Tezuka just nodded, looking slightly bemused.

So they started looking. Every cupboard and every crawl space was checked. Ryoma even pulled all the blankets from linen closet to check that nothing was wrapped up in them.

"Shouldn't it smell, though?" he asked.

"That's one way to check," Tezuka agreed. "But if it's hidden, there's a lot of ways to cover it up. If it's somewhere sealed, the smell won't escape. The smell can be covered up with other odours, too - air fresheners or perfume could disguise it for a while."

"That common in those books you read?"

"Very."

Ryoma had invited Tezuka along mostly so that he wouldn't have to endure the task of searching alone, but the captain possessed all sorts of useful knowledge and ideas thanks to all the crime novels he read. It was actually turning out to be pretty useful. "The ensuite next, then." In any of the few instances he'd borrowed that bathroom in the past, it reeked of his mother's perfume.

Tezuka hesitated at the door. "Isn't that invading your parent's privacy?"

Ryoma wasn't particularly comfortable about entering his father's room either, but there was no point in searching if they didn't check everywhere. "It's fine." He didn't intend to linger or leave any traces of their presence anyway. His skin prickled as he crossed the threshold into the Master bedroom.

The whole room had a sort of atmosphere about it that was both enormous and claustrophobic at the same time. Going through the closets in particular made his skin crawl. Invading his parent's privacy was bad enough when he *wasn't* looking for evidence of sinister crimes. His lip briefly curled when he stumbled upon his father's stash of dirty magazines - it was an impressive stack - but he ploughed on through.

They searched the room quickly. Tezuka looked visibly uncomfortable, but he pointed out all the various places to check that Ryoma missed anyway. The ensuite carried a cloying scent of perfume, but it wasn't as strong as Ryoma remembered it being, and in any case the adjoined bathroom was barely large enough to move about in, much less hide a body.

Nothing. There was nothing unusual in the room and ensuite whatsoever.

That was everywhere upstairs. "Downstairs next," Ryoma declared, grateful to leave his father's room. He cast a critical eye over to make sure nothing was out of place, before carefully shutting the door behind him.

The lower level of the house didn't yield any progress either. Ryoma bit his lip. He should have been relieved by the lack of evidence, but it only made him antsier.

"The body doesn't necessarily have to be in one piece," Tezuka pointed out. "Killers will sometimes cut it into smaller portions and hide the parts."

Ryoma stared. "That's sort of morbid, Buchou."

"Is it?"

He nodded emphatically. "Fuji-senpai and Inui-senpai have been a bad influence on you."

"Oh." Tezuka looked a little disappointed by that.

"It's a good point, though," he conceded. Having a brainwave, he opened the cupboard under the sink. It was filled with Tupperware tubs and cardboard boxes - all left over from when they'd moved into the house earlier in the year.

"We're going to check *all* of these containers?" Tezuka asked.

Ryoma just pulled out the first one and opened it. Empty. Tezuka's idea was a good one, no matter how morbid it was. They should check smaller spaces... for smaller bodies. He nearly choked at the thought of his cat, but grit his teeth and kept looking. After a moment, Tezuka started pulling out the boxes and checking them too. It was obvious that the captain thought it something of a game. Ryoma was okay with that; though he was a little surprised that Tezuka would indulge in something so frivolous with him.

On the other hand, it did strike him as the only sort of 'pretend' Tezuka would ever play along with. Either way, he was glad for the captain's presence.

They made it through all of containers stored under the sink, and checked a few more in some other cupboards, but they still didn't find anything. The house looked to be clean. Ryoma ran a hand through his hair, glancing out the window. Checking outside was next, he supposed.

"C'mon, Buchou, the yard is next. We'll do the back first." He went to get their shoes. "What clues would there be for outside?" He slid open the door that led to the backyard, and froze.

"Hey, boy, you're home!" Nanjiroh was standing on the wooden patio outside, dressed in his black monk robes as usual.

Ryoma's hand dropped limply from the door, and he could feel the blood drain from his face. A chill ran down his spine. "Old man." Had they taken that long? Wasn't it a bit early for his father to be down from the shrine?

"So disrespectful. Who's this serious-looking guy?"

The words felt heavy in his mouth. "Tezuka-buchou."

"Ah, so you're the kid-captain," his father exclaimed. "I hear you're pretty good."

"This is our first time meeting, but I've heard a lot about you," Tezuka replied formally, bowing. Nanjiroh waved the formality off.

"So what are you kids up to?"

"We were going to-" Tezuka started to respond, but Ryoma quickly interrupted.

"Actually, Buchou, let me get my racquet bag. We can play on the street courts."

"But didn't you want to try outside?" Tezuka asked, apparently surprised by his kouhai's sudden switch in interest.

"Nah, it'll turn up on its own. Karupin can survive without it until it does," he said carefully. Fortunately, Tezuka wasn't the sort of openly display confusion. "I'll be back later, old man."

Nanjiroh inclined his head in acknowledgement. "So long as you're back in time for dinner."

Tezuka bowed again. "It was nice meeting you."

They left the house. Ryoma kept his expression carefully neutral and his eyes to the front, even though his heart was pounding wildly in his chest. He could practically feel his father's gaze resting heavily on the back of his neck. Was he just being paranoid, or did his father suspect?

Tezuka didn't comment at the abrupt change in plans, but he did send a couple of questioning glances between the freshman and the house. Only once they were a couple of blocks away did he ask, "You didn't want him to know?"

Ryoma tugged his cap down over his eyes, and didn't reply.

He didn't want to drag Tezuka into things, but Ryoma was still anxious about checking around the outside of the house. He only managed to wait two days before inviting Tezuka over again for another bout of 'detective'. The captain gave him an odd look this time, but agreed. Maybe he thought that Ryoma was going to plant something for them to 'find', or he just thought he was being polite by indulging his kouhai's childish desires - either way, Ryoma didn't care. He was too frazzled to care. His nerves were completely shot, and only managing to get a couple of hours sleep a night was wearing him down.

Ryoma checked the inside of the house first to make sure that his father wasn't nearby before they started looking around the yard. It was clear. The old man was up at the shrine where he belonged.

Ryoma let out a shaky breath at that, and turned to his guest. "So, what should we look for first?"

"Good things to watch out for are things like recently upturned earth, and evidence of digging," Tezuka recalled. "Suspicious footprints. Miscoloured grass. Anything out of place."

"You really know a lot about this stuff, don't you Buchou?"

Tezuka looked faintly embarrassed. "I've just read a lot is all."

Ryoma nodded, and started poking around underneath bushes. "By the way, let me know if you see any sign of Karupin."

"Karupin?" Tezuka was brushing aside a patch of leaves and inspecting some of the stones lining one of the garden beds. Without his mother and cousin's tender care, weeds were starting to overgrow the yard.

"My cat. He's a Himalayan."

"Ah, the cat that Momoshiro brought here that time," Tezuka recalled. "He's missing?"

Ryoma wanted Tezuka to be on the lookout, just in case. "Something like that."

They checked the yard thoroughly. Ryoma even crawled under the house to check there, but it was dusty and full of spiderwebs and obviously hadn't been disturbed for years and there was no way his father would have been able to fit in there if even Tezuka couldn't follow him into the crawlspace. He came out streaked in grime and covered in bits of spiderweb. Tezuka started picking the strands off him gingerly. "We haven't found anything. Maybe you should go clean up."

"Yeah," he agreed reluctantly. The yard was clean, too. Not even a rock was out of place. Had he just wasted their time?

Ryoma was frustrated. It wasn't like he *wanted* to find a body - either Karupin's *or* his mother's - but at least if he *did* the mystery would be solved and the agony of not knowing would be over. But they'd looked *everywhere*, and hadn't found a thing.

Wait...

That wasn't quite true. They hadn't looked *everywhere* .

He glanced in the direction of the shrine.

They couldn't check the shrine, though. Not with his father there, minding it throughout the day for his monk friend.

Ryoma clenched his hands into fists, shivering slightly. "Is something the matter?" Tezuka asked.

"Nothing," he replied dully. "Thanks for helping out, Buchou."

"It's no problem. I hope you find your cat."

Right. Now Tezuka apparently thought it had all been elaborate ploy to get help looking for his cat. Ryoma didn't mind, though. And it was sort of true, anyway.

It was only another five days until Nanako came back. He could last that long, right? She'd probably laugh at him for worrying, and bring him news of his mother, and everything would be normal again. Karupin could just be lost. It had happened before.

He saw Tezuka off, and tried very hard not to react at the return of the short blue heels in the foyer.

The thought of the shrine continued to bother him, but Ryoma didn't really know what to do about it. He didn't dare try to search the area while his father was there - if he did find something... well, he

doubted the old man would let him get that far, but if he stumbled across it anyway, who knew how he would react? It just wasn't safe.

He agonised over it for two days, but comforted himself with the thought that there were only three days until Nanako returned. Ryoma was heartened by the notion. He was sure he could last three more days, even if every day felt like an eternity.

Although... if his theory was true, that meant Nanako was returning to a dangerous situation. He didn't want to put his cousin through that. His father might do something stupid if he felt pressured by her return. It probably wasn't that safe for him, either. Ryoma shivered. He'd feel a little bit better greeting her home if he had a better idea of the situation.

Ryoma tapped his pen against his notebook idly. He wasn't making any progress on his homework whatsoever. He glanced outside the window. The sun was starting to set. Several thumps downstairs announced his father's return to the house. A moment later, the dull blaring of the television reached his ears, muffled through the closed door. He paused.

Perhaps...

If he snuck out through the front door, his father probably wouldn't notice him leaving the house. He could double around to the back and go to the shrine with the old man none the wiser.

Ryoma hesitated for a few minutes in the grip of nervousness and indecision, before he stood and shuffled to the door. He opened it as silently as possible and tiptoed down the stairs. The television continued to murmur in the background uninterrupted.

He barely allowed himself to breathe until he'd eased out of the house and shut the front door. Letting out a sigh of relief, Ryoma started around the back, being careful to check that the way was clear before stealthily making his way up to the shrine in the twilight.

It only took a couple of minutes to make the trip. He spent a moment looking around, getting orientated. Ryoma didn't visit the shrine very often, save for the occasional time when a ball on the temporary tennis court his father had set up nearby went wide or when his mother - his heart skipped a beat at the recollection - would send him to fetch the old man. There just wasn't much there to interest him - the shrine itself, a board for charms, an old dilapidated well, the bell, and not a whole lot else.

There were plenty of places to hide a body, though.

Shivering, Ryoma started looking. It was the only place he hadn't searched yet. He poked around the structure underneath the bell, looking for any patches of recently upturned earth as Tezuka had suggested. It was undisturbed. He checked inside the shrine just in case, but that was empty too.

His eyes landed on the well next. Slowly, he headed towards it, wincing at the sound of dry grass crackling loudly under his feet.

Taking a deep breath, he placed a hand on the stone. It was smooth and cold underneath his fingers. He screwed up his courage and quickly glanced inside.

Nothing. The bottom of the well was shrouded in darkness.

Ryoma bit his lip. Thinking about it, the well was the ideal place. It was old and unused, maintained only for the very occasional visitor to toss in a few coins. No one drew water from it anymore because the shallow pools that formed at the bottom were stagnant and smelly. It would even cover up the scent of rotting skin.

He let his hand slip off the cold rock. He needed to come back with a flashlight. Just to be sure. Even if it was only a couple more days until Nanako came back, he didn't think he'd be able to handle another sleepless night of allowing his imagination to cook up horrible scenarios. And if it did turn out to be the worst scenario, he

should probably know, so that she didn't put herself in danger with innocent queries when she returned.

He carefully retraced his steps back to the house in the growing gloom, eased open the front door and slipped inside soundlessly. The television was still going. He hadn't been missed. Ryoma let out a relieved sigh. He headed into the kitchen next, rifling through the drawers until he found the flashlight. He checked the batteries, then crept out into the hall. It was almost time for dinner. He wouldn't be able to look now without being missed.

Reluctantly, Ryoma hid the flashlight in his room and returned to the living room. "Hey, old man, what's for dinner?" he asked.

Nanjiroh threw him a disinterested glance. "Pizza, I guess. The menu should be on the fridge. Just order another one of whatever you're having."

Ryoma went through the motions of ordering robotically, mind firmly fixed on the well at the shrine. Dinner seemed to take forever to arrive. When the doorbell rang he went to answer. No Karupin followed him to the door this time, mewing at the prospect of food.

Dinner was eaten in awkward silence. His father gave him an odd glance a few times - Ryoma usually made a point of complaining about something trivial, to keep up face, but didn't trust his voice to remain steady that night. Once they were finished eating, his father returned to sitting in front of the TV, and Ryoma retreated to his room.

He waited for half an hour, feet bouncing nervously as he perched on the edge of his bed, cradling the flashlight. Eventually, he couldn't stand waiting any longer, and snuck to the door, holding his ear against it. By the sounds of it his father was still watching TV, and it didn't look like he was going anywhere anytime soon.

Ryoma was briefly tempted to wait for a time to go with Tezuka, just in case. He might have missed something in the shrine area, after

all. But in the end, he quietly slipped out of his room and headed outside. He could check the well now at the very least. There was no way to be sure of when he'd next get a chance. Just a look. If the well was empty he could still investigate the shrine area more thoroughly with Tezuka later.

The path to the shrine was dark, and the feeble moonlight provided by the crescent moon did little to light his way. Ryoma didn't dare turn on the flashlight until he was a safe distance from the house, though - there was always the slim chance of his father glancing outside and seeing. After what felt like an eternity he was back at the shrine. It was creepier at night, coloured grey by the moonlight and casting long dark distorted shadows that resembled misshapen monsters.

Ryoma resolutely ignored the distorted dark shapes and headed directly for the well. He took a deep breath, braced himself against the cold, crumbling stone, and pointed the flashlight inside.

The spotlight skidded across the dark damp stone walls in a disorientating fashion. Steadying his hand, Ryoma started directing the beam to the dark depths, eyes straining to pick out details.

There! The light had caught the edge of something. Carefully, Ryoma moved the spotlight backwards, and felt his heart stop.

It was a hand! A human hand! The skin was coloured, crumbling, decayed and utterly foul looking, but there was no mistake. He felt vomit threatening to rise in his throat, and he reflexively looked away, not wanting to confront the sickening sight.

Ryoma swallowed harshly, wishing he'd waited to bring Tezuka with him on this search after all. But it was too late to turn back now - he didn't know when he'd next get another chance. Carefully, he turned back and directed the shaking beam of light upwards. He had to be sure. He didn't want to see, he was terrified of seeing, but he had to know.

The light caught a wisp of long, dark hair.

The flashlight slipped through nerveless fingers. It fell into the well with an echoing crack, and the light winked out of existence.

He'd gone looking for his mother, but that lifeless corpse with glassy eyes at the bottom of the well wasn't her. It belonged to his beautiful, sweet and thoughtful cousin Nanako.

Ryoma ran away from the shrine blindly, thoughts whirling chaotically in his head. It was Nanako. Nanako wasn't in America. Nanako was dead.

He couldn't believe it. He didn't want to believe it. Blood was roaring in his ears as he tripped over twigs and stumbled in the darkness, heedless of where he was going. He just had to get away .

He didn't even realise that his hasty flight had carried him back to the house until the back door slid open. His father peered out into the darkness, wreathed by a rectangle of bright light. "Boy, what are you doing out here?"

For a second, everything froze. Ryoma's mind skidded to a halt, and his breath caught in his throat. It was only through sheer force of will that he relaxed and managed to form an appropriate response.

"Looking for Karupin," he replied tightly. "I thought I heard a noise."

"You still haven't found that damn cat?"

Ryoma shook his head mutely.

"Che." His father turned away, then looked back when Ryoma didn't follow. "What? Hurry up and come inside."

He didn't want to. Did his father suspect he knew? He had no reason to. Ryoma willed his limbs to stop shaking and carefully followed him

inside.

He was alone in the house with a killer. A *serial* killer. The fact that it was his father just made it worse.

Police. He needed to call the police. If only he'd called them sooner, if only he'd risked being wrong and looking paranoid, then maybe Nanako and Karupin...

But he hadn't suspected anything was wrong until after Nanako was gone. And even then, he hadn't wanted to believe.

It was murder. His father had killed them all.

Nanako wasn't coming back.

Ryoma carefully made his way to the hallway by the kitchen.

He couldn't do anything. If his father even suspected... would he be next? Was that why Nanako had died? She'd been worrying about her Aunt quite a lot, even going so far as to suggest she bring lunch to her as nice gesture. It must have made his father nervous. Did Nanjiroh set her up with tickets so that no one would miss her presence, and then kill her right before she left?

He couldn't call the police, not where his father could be listening. But he needed help. His father was just the next room over. His fingers fumbled with the numbers on the phone's keypad. He couldn't waste time looking for the cordless.

He desperately tried to still his shaking fingers as he cradled the receiver to his ear.

The phone rang once. Rang twice. Three times.

On the fourth ring, someone finally answered. "Hello?"

"... Buchou?" he croaked. His voice wavered uncertainly.

There was a pause, then... "Echizen? Why are you calling?"

"Where are you?"

"I'm at the sports centre. The one with the ball feeders."

He father wandered through the hallway into the kitchen, yawning and stretching. Ryoma's eyes tracked his path, fingers tightening around the phone's cord. Nanjiroh fetched a can of beer from the fridge and headed back into the living room.

"Echizen? Are you alright?" Tezuka asked when he didn't respond.

"That's why I'm calling," he replied carefully. He had to make it sound like an ordinary conversation. "You remember those books?"

"Books?"

"You always figure it out first, don't you, Buchou?" he continued, struggling to keep his voice steady.

"You're talking about the detective novels?" Tezuka guessed.

"I figured it out first this time," he continued. "But now I've sort of got a problem."

That was when Ryoma heard the telltale click of someone picking up the extension.

Tezuka continued unaware of the eavesdropper. "Echizen, you know that I was humouring you, but are you saying... that it was real? You weren't just looking for your cat?"

"Buchou-" he tried to interrupt.

"Echizen, was there really a body? Are you in danger?"

He was busted. "Get help, Buchou!" He yelled into the phone then threw it aside.

From the receiver, he could still hear Tezuka's voice calling out.
"Echizen... hey, Echizen!"

Ryoma didn't waste any time. *Where, where...* he heard thundering footsteps, and panicked. The front door... he wouldn't make it in time. His father was coming from the back, so he couldn't go out that way.

The only way out was up. He darted up the stairs with a speed that would have done Kikumaru proud. He ran into his room, slamming the door shut behind him and clicking the lock. In a panic, he dragged a chest of drawers in front of it. He fumbled for his tennis racquet, grabbing it and clutching it like a safety blanket.

The doorknob rattled. Then... "Oi, boy, open the door! I want to talk!"

Ryoma shook his head back and forth slowly, retreating further into the corner. He clutched his tennis racquet protectively against his chest.

"You've got the wrong idea! I just have to explain-"

He eyeballed the window. Could he maybe reach the branches of the tree outside and escape that way? His father might hear him, though, and beat him downstairs. What could he do? Was it safer to try and wait it out inside, or better to take a risk by trying to get out through the window? It was only the second story - if he fell he would survive, but if he hurt himself in the fall could he still get away in time? Tezuka was nearby. The sports complex was only six or seven blocks away. He could probably make it there before his father caught up with enough of a head start.

"It was an accident with your mother! It's a misunderstanding!"

"What about Nanako?! What do you call that?!" he yelled back, voice shaking.

"That's..." His father's voice trailed off. The hallway became silent.

Maybe... maybe his father hadn't actually killed Nanako? What if it was just a horrible, horrible coincidence?

A second later, something heavy banged loudly against the door. The drawers rattled. Ryoma bit his lip. "DAMN IT BRAT, OPEN UP!" The door shook again.

His heart thudded in his chest. There was no such thing as coincidences.

Ryoma flinched as the door shook again and again. It sounded like the wood was cracking. The door wasn't particularly heavy, nor the frame robust. Could it hold out?

After what felt like an eternity, the thudding stopped. Footsteps led away from the door. Ryoma didn't dare move from the corner, though.

A minute or two of oppressive silence, and the footsteps returned. He clutched the racquet harder. Then Ryoma heard another sound that sent prickles of fear across his skin: the faint jingle of keys.

The lock clicked, and the handle turned. The door only managed to open a sliver before the drawers blocked it. His father swore, the door shook again, and the drawers scraped half an inch across the floor.

The drawers wouldn't hold his father back. Nothing in his room would.

It was the window after all.

Frantically, Ryoma scrambled to his feet, shaking fingers fumbling for the hatch on his window. The frame jammed. "Openopenopenopen," he begged under his breath, putting all of his weight behind it.

He was too slow. It was too late. With a crash, the drawers were shoved aside and light from the hallway spilled into the dark room.

Ryoma whirled, eyes automatically darting to an unexpected flash of silver. It took him a moment to process the source, and then another moment to realise what that meant.

His father was holding a *knife* .

He hadn't just gone to get keys - he'd gone to get a knife as well!

He couldn't believe it. His father truly meant to kill him to hide his secret.

Breath coming in short, panicked gasps, Ryoma brandished his racquet for lack of any other weapon. "Stay back!" His voice wobbled, and he cursed his own weakness. Still, the reach of his racquet was longer than that of a knife, maybe he could...

Nanjiroh reached out and caught the racquet frame with his hand. With one twist and jerk, it was pulled from his grasp.

No.

He was going to die.

He didn't want to die. He stared up at his father with wide eyes. The knife gleamed, catching the light from the hallway.

"Echizen!"

Ryoma glanced towards the door. Tezuka...?

"What?!" Nanjiroh whirled, clearly not expecting to be interrupted. Tezuka darted forward, hand striking at the fist clutching the knife. The blade clattered to the floor as the captain wrestled with his father. He was holding his own impressively well, and even managed to get the old man into something of a lock. The captain learnt judo from his grandfather, Ryoma remembered, though he couldn't recall where exactly he'd heard that detail. It sounded like something Inui might have spouted at some point.

Ryoma held his breath as his captain tussled with his father. Adrenaline was still surging through his veins. Tezuka might be more skilled, but his father was *strong* . The captain wouldn't be able to keep him at bay forever.

Words of warning hovered on his lips, but his throat was closed. He didn't want to lose anyone else. He couldn't lose anyone else.

Police sirens wailed in the distance.

Ryoma saw the knife discarded on the floor. The sharp edge gleamed silver in the moonlight streaming in from his half-open window.

He couldn't take it. He didn't want to deal with it anymore. His mother. Nanako. Karupin.

Steady fingers wrapped around the hilt of the knife.

His father had his back to him as he pushed Tezuka away, finally breaking the captain's sloppy judo hold. "You're still just a kid!" he taunted, in the exact same voice he had taunted Ryoma with so many times on the tennis court.

Tezuka tripped backwards over the racquet bag in the corner and slumped to the ground, hands thrown back to keep himself upright and facing Nanjiroh. He turned his head slightly, then his eyes widened as he caught sight of his kouhai. His lips mouthed a plea, but no sound emerged. Ryoma stepped forward.

"What are you-?" His father's words were cut short with a choked gasp as Ryoma plunged the knife into his back.

It was over.

It was finally over.

"Echizen! Echizen!"

Ryoma had slipped off into a daze at some point, so it took him a moment to realize that someone was shaking his shoulders. Oh, it was the captain. Blearily, he tried to focus on his face. It felt dreamlike. It was just a dream, right? He hadn't... he hadn't...

There was a body on the floor, lying in a growing pool of blood. Ryoma stared at it.

"Buchou... did I...?"

Tezuka crouched down so that he was looking up at him. "Listen to me, Echizen. It was an accident. He wasn't holding the knife properly, and in the struggle you pulled it away from him and held it out to keep him back. Then when I called out, he turned around. He was surprised when he saw me and stumbled backwards into the knife. You were too shocked to move. It wasn't your fault."

He frowned. That wasn't how it happened at all. "But-"

"I saw it all," Tezuka said seriously. "I witnessed everything. It wasn't your fault."

Ryoma was confused, but he nodded silently.

"Are you alright? You're not injured anywhere?"

Ryoma shook his head.

"Don't worry. The police will be here soon."

It was over. He'd lost everything... but he was finally safe again.

Ryoma buried his head in his arms, and finally allowed himself to cry.

Coach Ryuuzaki handed him a cup of hot chocolate. Ryoma took it and held it in his hands, but didn't drink. He just stared blankly into

space.

"The police called earlier. They found Rinko's... they found her."

"Where was she?" Ryoma asked dully.

"In the same well as your cousin." She grimaced. "The body had degraded a lot in that time, but the autopsy is suggesting that it very well might have just been an accident. They don't know for sure, but it looked like she might have broken her neck in a shallow fall. They're going to record that one as a domestic argument ending in a tragic accident."

Ryoma took a sip of the hot chocolate. "And Nanako...?"

"Even if it was an accident, he couldn't face his first crime. I guess he was driven mad with guilt." Ryuuzaki sighed. "You're lucky. You shouldn't have been playing detective in a situation like that."

Ryoma didn't respond. His finger traced the rim of the cup lightly.

There was a knock on the front door. Ryuuzaki smiled at him reassuringly and went to answer it. Ryoma could hear familiar voices in the hallway, but they didn't really register until they entered the room. "Echizen. You've got visitors," Ryuuzaki said softly.

He glanced up. Tezuka was there, but the real surprise was to see Kaidoh standing next to him. And even more surprising than that was the bundle of white in the Viper's arms.

"Karupin?" Ryoma whispered in disbelief. "Karupin!"

Kaidoh handed the cat over, looking slightly embarrassed. "I found him near my house about a week ago," he said gruffly.

"When I overheard Kaidoh talking about it, I remembered you said that your cat had gone missing," Tezuka added.

Ryoma clutched his cat to his chest, almost unwilling to believe this godsend. He'd been so sure... but Karupin had just run away. Karupin had just *run away* .

It was too good to be true.

Karupin mewed softly. Ryoma stroked his fur, relishing the familiar sensation. It was something loved and ordinary. Something familiar. "Thank you, Kaidoh-senpai," he croaked out.

"It's nothing," Kaidoh grunted, face blushing slightly. "Sorry I didn't realise sooner. But he wasn't any trouble. He's a smart cat."

Ryoma's fingers stilled in the fur, though, as thoughts suddenly started whirling in his head again.

... His father glared at the cat, still cradling his bleeding hand. "You were there ."...

... "It was an accident with your mother! It's a misunderstanding!"...

"... it looked like she might have broken her neck in a shallow fall..."

Karupin mewed uncertainly. Ryoma started petting him again.

It didn't matter. It was all in the past, now. It didn't change anything at all. "Thanks, Buchou, Kaidoh-senpai," he repeated, and hugged Karupin just a little tighter.